



Theological Roots of Humility in Politics

By Congressman David E. Price (D-N.C.)

"... I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think...." (Romans 12:3)

Humility is out of fashion these days. Political leaders, advocates, and pundits often display an in-your-face assertiveness, seeming to equate uncertainty or even reflectiveness with weakness and a lack of moral fiber. Much of our nation and its leadership are in no mood to doubt their own righteousness.

As the "Power of Pride" bumper stickers proliferate, it may be jarring to recognize that the apostle Paul regarded people's tendency toward prideful self-glorification to be the very essence of sin. Interpreting the Pauline view in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Reinhold Niebuhr saw particular danger in spiritual pride: "when our partial standards and relative attainments are explicitly related to the unconditional good, and claim divine sanction."

"The worst form of intolerance," Niebuhr went on, "is religious intolerance, in which the particular interests of the contestants hide behind religious absolutes. The worst form of self-assertion is religious self-assertion, in which under the guise of contrition before God, He is claimed as the exclusive ally of our contingent self."


Note that Niebuhr did not issue these warnings as a secularist, skittish about the influence faith might have on public affairs. On the contrary, his was a prophetic faith leading him to a lifetime of engagement in the struggle for justice at home and internationally. That faith informed both bold political aspiration and action and an attendant humility, rooted in an understanding of God's transcendence and human sinfulness.

Integral to the Jewish and Christian traditions is the recognition that people are inclined to a kind of idolatry whereby they identify their own interest or ideology with God's sovereign will. But that will remains transcendent and is only imperfectly reflected in human endeavors, which are invariably subject to the taint of self-seeking and the will to power. "We must not regard any human institution or object as being an end in itself," wrote Abraham Joshua Heschel. "Man's achievements in this world are but attempts, and a temple that comes to mean more than a reminder of the living God is an abomination."

Abraham Lincoln's magnificent Second Inaugural offers a model of conviction and determination devoid of posturing and pride: "Both [sides] read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces; but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered—that of neither has been answered fully."

Niebuhr once wrote that this passage "puts the relation of our moral commitments in history to our religious reservations about the partiality of our own moral commitments more precisely than, I think, any statesman or theologian has put them." Lincoln expressed the moral commitment against slavery in uncompromising terms, along with the determination to "finish the work we are in." But there followed the religious reservation, the recognition that ultimate judgment belongs to God alone, the refusal, even in this extreme instance, to presume an

absolute identification between his own cause and God's will.

On another occasion, responding to a clergyman who expressed the hope that the Lord was on the side of the Union, Lincoln reportedly said, "I know that the Lord is always on the side of the right. But it is my constant anxiety and prayer that I and this nation should be on the Lord's side." That is indeed the crucial question: Are we on the Lord's side? We ought never to lose awareness of God's transcendence and of the constant temptation to identify God's will with our own. The humility that resists such arrogance and pretention, in ourselves or in others, is not merely rooted in our commitment to tolerance and pluralism. It is based on the deepest insights of our religious traditions themselves. 

Suggested Reading

Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man*. Octagon, 1972.

Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*. Scribner's, 1952.

Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. Scribner's, 1949.